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SECRET

18 May 1961

[redacted]

The Director of Central Intelligence

Current Situation in South Korea

Copy to Mr. McGeorge Bundy

Copy to General Clifton

HUNTINGTON D. SHELDON
Assistant Director
Current Intelligence

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25X1

HDSheldon: [redacted] (18 May 61)

State Dept. review completed

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01-2298-61

16 May 1961

CURRENT SITUATION IN SOUTH KOREA

1. A well-planned coup executed by some 3,000 army troops and marines in Seoul overthrew the government of Prime Minister Chang Myon on 15 May. The insurgents seized the Seoul radio station and broadcast orders over the name of Army Chief of Staff Lt. General Chang To-yong establishing martial law throughout the Nation.

2. The leader of the revolt is Major General Pak Chung-hui who still exercises the real power in the Military Revolutionary Committee government. Pak, a one-time officer in the Japanese army, was commissioned in the Korean army in 1946. He was court-martialed in 1948 on charges of being a Communist and was sentenced to 10 years in prison. Pak was recalled to service at the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 and subsequently pardoned because of his war record. He is not known to have re-established contacts with the Communists or to have been connected with South Korean leftist groups since 1948. Following the ouster of the Rhee regime, Pak was involved in the agitation of younger officers to rid the army of senior officers who allegedly had profited from their support of Rhee.

3. The coup leaders were able to establish control easily because of the absence of any resistance in Seoul and the public indifference or apathy shown in other areas. The prime minister went into hiding and made no effort to rally any forces against the coup. The Army Chief of Staff,

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General Chang To-yong, assured a cautious role attempting to maintain a favorable position with the coup leaders and the American side. Chang still holds the spotlight as head of the Military Revolutionary Committee, but he is probably a figurehead.

4. President Yun Po-sun used his influence for a compromise that would provide a semblance of legality for the coup actions and put the government transition within a framework of constitutionality.

5. Prime Minister Chang Myon emerged from hiding on 18 May and broadcast that the martial law proclaimed by Lt. General Chang To-yong as chairman of the Military Revolutionary Committee was legal. He announced the resignation of his cabinet opening the way for transitional measures that would be legal under the Constitution. This significantly strengthens the political position of the committee.

6. The military base for the governing committee was secured on 17 May when the commander of the First Army Lt. General Yi Han-lim publicly declared his support of the coup. 25X1

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7. [redacted] an early return to civilian government is likely to permit extreme right-wing elements associated with the Rhee regime to return to power. The American embassy reports that the revolutionary presently lacks personnel capable of dealing with economic problems and has no real economic program. The embassy believes the committee is probably counting on former government officials with economic experience to fill the gap.

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8. The possibility of former [illegible] officials gaining influence is indicated by a censored newspaper report on 17 May that a cabinet of elders had been established. This included Paek Nak-chun (George Paek), Yi Sun-sol, Ryon Hong-tae, Kim [illegible]-il, Paek Su-chin and Song Yo-chan.

9. The revolutionary government is moving to enforce its anti-communist program. The staff of the leftist newspaper Minjok Ilbo and the editor of Minjok Ilbo have been arrested. The arrest of all persons on a Communist Watch List--reported to comprise 70,000 persons, including families, friends and associates--has been ordered. A proclamation calls for all spies to surrender by 10 June under a promise of lenient treatment. After that date all spies that are apprehended will be given capital punishment.

10. Initial communist reaction betrayed a lack of information. Subsequent comment labelled the coup leaders reactionary and warned against US interference. There has been no evidence of any military reaction on the part of North Korea to the coup.

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